



Gregory J. Nickels  
Mayor of Seattle

September 14, 2004

Honorable Jan Drago,  
President  
Seattle City Council  
City Hall, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

Dear President Drago:

One of the most important transportation issues before the Council is the Mercer Mess – an issue that has been studied and debated for at least 40 years with no progress made. Today, we have an opportunity to make progress, and I want to thank you and the Council for your attention to this issue.

For your important work, the Council deserves tools to make the right decisions, especially on an issue of this complexity. The Council needs factual information, sound methodology and quality analysis.

I don't think the Sept. 13 Central Staff memo on the Mercer corridor met that standard. That report uses wrong data and a flawed methodology, jumbles different scenarios and makes "apples to oranges" comparisons, and it presents the Council with misleading conclusions. These errors were avoidable had Council staff accepted SDOT's request to review Staff's preliminary findings in advance of its release.

I have directed staff with the Seattle Department of Transportation to work with Council staff to correct the errors in the Sept. 13 memo.

What follows is a summary of the errors.

The Sept. 13 memo errs in its cost estimation. The author cites a figure of \$200-to-\$210 million to describe the Mercer Corridor Project. This is wrong. The range of alternatives in the project is \$50-to-\$165 million. The two-way Mercer alternative is estimated at \$55-to-\$70 million.

The Sept. 13 report relies upon wrong data to form its conclusions. The report uses traffic analysis data from the South Lake Union Transportation Study instead of the specific data from the Mercer Corridor Project. The two sources of data are not comparable. The South Lake Union Transportation Study analyzes the overall traffic impacts of a large set of transportation projects envisioned for the entire urban village. The Mercer Corridor Project, on the other hand, provides specific data for each of the Mercer/Valley corridor options to provide an accurate comparison across alternatives.



The memo uses flawed methodology. For example, the author converted travel time information to speed, assuming that speed is a comparable measure. It is not. The appropriate measurement is the time it takes to make a trip and is defined by the following equation:

$$\text{Distance of Travel} / \text{Speed of Travel} = \text{Travel Time}$$

Using half of this equation results in an erroneous methodology that leads to wrong conclusions. Two examples:

- ☐ By using the travel speed measurement, the staff report erroneously implies that a Two-way Mercer would increase travel time between I-5 and the north side of Seattle Center. In fact, just the opposite is true. A west-bound trip from I-5 to north Seattle Center would take one and a half minutes less than the no-action alternative even though the vehicle speed would be slower.

	Movement	Travel Distance (miles)	Travel Speed (mph)	Travel Time (minutes)
No-Build 2030	Westbound I-5 to N. Seattle Center	1.2	9.4	7.7
Two-Way Mercer	Westbound I-5 to N. Seattle Center	0.9	8.8	6.1

- ☐ Similarly, the memo inaccurately implies that freight movement would not improve. In fact, just the opposite is true. The key corridor to measure freight movement is the trip from I-5 north using Westlake and back (eastbound and westbound). The Westbound trip does increase, but by only 24 seconds, and the eastbound trip is reduced by 1.5 minutes. This is an overall improvement and should not be considered a diminishment.

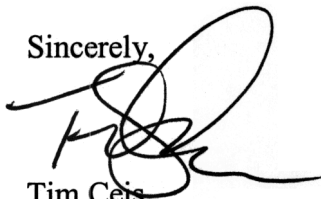
The Sept. 13 memo repeatedly makes a classic “apples to oranges” mistake. For example, the author compares two-way Mercer in 2030 with 2003 conditions, and that error leads him to a conclusion that two-way Mercer will do little or nothing to relieve congestion. Instead, the author should have compared alternatives within comparable timeframes and scenarios. That is the accepted practice in transportation planning. To do otherwise, is a fundamental error of analysis.

Quite apart from the issue of errors, the report focuses its analysis almost entirely on vehicle speeds to the exclusion of other objectives for the Mercer Corridor Project. Our City’s policy is well-established that our transportation system is not an end unto itself, but a means to create vibrant neighborhoods and a livable city. In the Mercer Corridor Project, SDOT took the policy guidelines from the Neighborhood Plan and Council Resolutions 30080 and 30610 to establish a set of balanced objectives for this project. These objectives include a multi-modal emphasis, a community desire to open up access to Lake Union and enhanced access to neighborhood businesses. Unfortunately, the

Council Report failed to evaluate the alternatives according to these objectives and, therefore, reached an incomplete conclusion. I expect that as Council proceeds in its deliberations of the Mercer Corridor alternatives, it will consider all of the objectives in its review.

The Mercer Mess is one of our city's most difficult transportation issues, but fundamentally, the news is good. We have a recommendation that enjoys broad support from a diverse group of neighborhood, business and community representatives. With a two-way Mercer Boulevard and a narrow Valley Street, we finally untangle the barriers and blockages in the middle of our city.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Ceis', with a large, stylized flourish extending from the end of the signature.

Tim Ceis,  
Deputy Mayor